

Original Voices
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Carl Malamud

*One of the first people on the front lines of the Internet revolution, Carl Malamud began badgering the U. S. government to put huge databases on-line in 1994, and in 1996 launched an Internet world's fair, an event that involved participants from 80 countries and attracted over five million visitors. Malamud discusses that extraordinary world gathering—and its impact on his and our lives—in his new book, **A World's Fair for the Global Village**. We asked him to tell us, in a nutshell, about the fair.*

Invisible Fair, Real World

New Year's Day 1996, I crawled through three-foot snowdrifts to my office in a cramped warren on top of a seedy Chinese restaurant in Washington, D. C. I sat down in front of a screen, finished my coffee, and officially opened the gates of the Internet 1996 World Exposition.

Though I was alone in our somewhat unimposing world headquarters, visitors started streaming into the fairgrounds on the Net. The first day, people from over 40 countries came. By the end of the year when we closed the fair, we had over five million visitors from 130 countries. Laurie Anderson called this a fair in the air, an invisible fair. Her poet's sense of imagery certainly captured my surreal feeling on that opening day. But was this real?

An Internet world's fair may sound like it must undoubtedly and uniquely be invisible, but it really wasn't. Indeed, those who enjoyed it most associate their memories with a strong sense of place. Perhaps they visited the fair at the National Palace Museum in

Taiwan, or attended one of Ryuichi Sakamoto's concerts, on the Net or in a concert hall. Perhaps they participated in a road rally in Mongolia, or attended Garry Kasparov's chess match with Deep Blue.

In this book, I try and tell some of the stories of the fair, but I also try and tell the story of why we did this. The fair grew out of projects all over the world, and the fair was only a small part of several exciting years when the Internet started to explode. The fair was an interlude, and just as important is what came before and what comes after.

Before the fair, my rag-tag nonprofit group had been a radio station, then turned quickly into a huge database of patent documents, then became an on-line Santa Claus. The fair was just another turn in this twisting path. All these projects were aimed at answering the same question: what is the Internet? I don't think I know the answer yet, but it certainly has been fun looking for it.